INBOX T@MERS

New e-mail options on the Web and on your desktop make dodging spam and staying organized easier than ever. **By Kevin Savetz**

WEB MAIL HAS come of age. It used to be an inferior way to get your messages: Storage capacity was low, and the services were simple. No more. Web mail services now offer spelling checkers, access to POP3 accounts, virus scanners—and plenty of storage space.

Client applications are typically more customizable than a Web service, and usually include collaboration functions. But if you don't need such extras, a Web service could suffice.

We scouted four Web services and four desktop clients to find out which have the best features and which do the best job of keeping your mailbox free of spam. Plus, we looked at a Web service that filters spam for multiple e-mail accounts and aggregates their inboxes.

You can choose from among several free, advertising-supported Web services—or spend about $20 a year for a service with enhanced functions and oodles of storage space. Gmail earned our Best Buy nod in part because it costs nothing and gives you 1GB of storage capacity. We also liked FastMail's paid services, which provide every tool an e-mail guru could want.

Among desktop apps, Mozilla Thunderbird won our Best Buy because it's free and full of features, but corporate users will prefer Outlook 2003 for its unmatched collaboration tools. ▶

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ILLUSTRATION: HEADCASE DESIGN

Web Mail Services

FASTMAIL

IF YOU TAKE your e-mail seriously, FastMail is the service for you. It lets you pick from more than a dozen domain names for your e-mail address, set up mail aliases so you can protect your primary addresses from spammers, and more. From searching old mail to accessing your address book, FastMail is both speedy and smart.

You can compose messages as text or use the cool WYSIWYG HTML editor—this is the only Web mail service we tested with such an editor.

FastMail is one of only two services we tested that scan for viruses; the other is Yahoo Mail.

FastMail is also the only Web service we tested that supports the IMAP protocol for accessing your account from a desktop e-mail client (to use POP3 you must pay the $20 or $40 annual fee). Also, you can download mail from other e-mail servers to your FastMail account, and arrange for the service to automatically fetch messages every 3 or 12 hours.

At its default setting, the spam filter was the least effective of those offered by Web services: 36 junk messages landed in the spam folder, but 21 others appeared in our inbox. FastMail's paid accounts offer more options, however, such as a unique "custom" mode that uses the SpamAssassin engine to assign a "spam score" to each message. You can assign three different actions based on these scores, telling FastMail to delete the messages, move them to a specified folder, or change their subject line to something like "I Love Spam." In addition, FastMail is one of only two services we tested that scan for viruses; the other is Yahoo Mail.

We appreciated FastMail's security consciousness, as well: When we chose an easy-to-guess password, the service recommended that we select a more robust one.

FastMail offers four types of accounts: The free Guest account provides 10MB of mail storage space but limits you to 40MB of mail and attachments per month and prohibits commercial use. (FastMail is the only service we tested that has an explicit bandwidth limitation.) Free accounts are deleted after only 45 days of inactivity. A one-time $15 fee gets you a Member account, with 16MB of storage, twice the bandwidth of the free account, a virus scanner, an SMTP server for sending messages

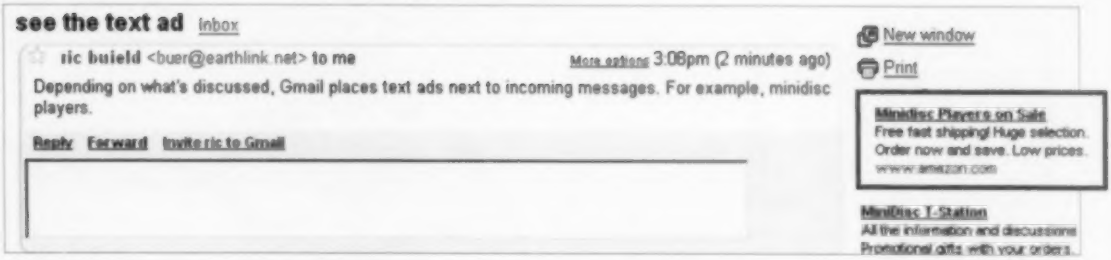
FEATURES COMPARISON

Web-Based E-Mail Comes of Age

GMAIL LACKS THE CLUTTER of other free offerings and gives you 1GB of storage, but it lacks a virus scanner.

WEB-BASED E-MAIL	Basics	Performance	Extra features	Comments
FastMail ★★★★½ find.pcworld.com/47096	• Free, 10MB storage • $15 one-time, 16MB storage • $20 or $40 per year; 600MB or 2GB storage, respectively	• Ease of use: Very Good • Features: Outstanding • Spam filtering: Fair • Overall speed: Very Good	• Virus scanning, adjustable spam filter • POP3, IMAP, Hotmail accounts • HTML editor, notepad • Mail forwarding, e-mail aliases	FastMail offers a clean, intuitive interface and many domain names to choose from. It can schedule downloads from POP3/IMAP accounts and scan for viruses, and it includes a unique HTML editor.
Google Gmail Best Buy ★★★★½ find.pcworld.com/47098	• Free (beta), 1GB storage • $40 per year, 2GB storage • No graphical ads	• Ease of use: Outstanding • Features: Outstanding • Spam filtering: Very Good • Overall speed: Very Good	• Mail forwarding • Accessible from POP3 accounts • E-mail–received alerts • Address entry completion	Google Gmail's sparse interface is free of graphical ads, and its rules-based filters offer a lot of control. Gmail Notifier can alert you when new messages arrive, even if you're not logged in.
MSN Hotmail ★★★☆☆ find.pcworld.com/47100	• Free, 250MB storage • $20 per year, 2GB storage • Lots of ads in free version	• Ease of use: Fair • Features: Fair • Spam filtering: Good • Overall speed: Fair	• Read with Outlook and Outlook Express • Adjustable spam filter • Calendar, tasks, notepad	The free version of Hotmail has ads everywhere, and the interface is a little clumsy. Though you can adjust the level of spam protection, messages in the spam folder are cleared after only five days.
Yahoo Mail ★★★★☆ find.pcworld.com/47102	• Free, 250MB storage • $20 per year, 2GB storage • Lots of ads in free version	• Ease of use: Very Good • Features: Very Good • Spam filtering: Good • Overall speed: Fair	• Virus scanning and cleaning • POP3 accounts, mail forwarding • Calendar, tasks, notepad; color coding • E-mail aliases, address entry completion	Yahoo Mail's free version serves up many ads, though the interface is intuitive. Intellisync application synchronizes address book, calendar, and so on with a PDA or with organization software.

CHART NOTES: The spam-filtering performance scores on this chart are based on less-formal testing than that conducted on desktop e-mail clients. We set up an account on each service on 1/24/05 and monitored it for 18 days. We tested each service's spam filter at default settings.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More options 3:08pm (2 minutes ago)
Depending on what's discussed, Gmail places text ads next to incoming messages. For example, minidisc players.
Reply Forward Invite ric to Gmail
New window
Print
Minidisc Players on Sale
Free fast shipping! Huge selection. Order now and save. Low prices.
www.amazon.com
MiniDisc T-Station
All the information and discussions
Promotional gifts with your orders.

GMAIL is free of clutter, though it displays text ads based on topics discussed in your e-mail.

from your desktop e-mail client instead of from a Web browser, and other features. The Full and Enhanced accounts, which cost $20 and $40 per year respectively, deliver up to 2GB of mail storage, plus file space, IMAP and POP3 access, and adjustable spam filtering. But even the free account that we set up was devoid of advertisements.

GOOGLE GMAIL

GOOGLE'S GMAIL IS a winner. It delivers features for free that many other Web-based mail services charge for, or don't offer at all. At 1GB, it supplies the largest inbox of the free services we tested.

Gmail is snappy—so fast in fact that it acts more like software on your desktop than like a Web site. When you start typing an e-mail address, for example, a list of recently used addresses quickly pops up. A speedy search function lets you locate messages across your folders in a fraction of a second.

The spam filter isn't configurable, but it works well. During our test period, nine junk messages landed in our inbox and one legitimate piece was misfiled into the spam folder. Messages in the spam folder are automatically deleted after 30 days.

Gmail's rules-based filters trump Hotmail's and Yahoo Mail's offerings, allowing you to automatically label, forward, archive, or delete incoming messages based on the sender, on the subject, or on words in the message body.

The interface is sparkling clean, and the advertisements are a breath of fresh air compared with those on Hotmail and Yahoo Mail. Text ads show up to the right of some incoming messages, and that's it: No graphical ads display at all. Unlike the free versions of Hotmail and Yahoo Mail, Gmail doesn't paste ads to the end of your outgoing messages. However, Gmail scans the text of incoming messages in deciding which ads to display, which worries some privacy advocates.

You can download messages to your desktop client using POP3 (but not IMAP) and automatically forward incoming mail to another address, useful features missing in the other free services. The Gmail Notifier app can alert you when messages arrive, even if you aren't logged in to Gmail—another unique feature. Gmail has no calendar or task lists, however: It's strictly about e-mail.

The service removes dormant accounts after nine months of inactivity, a significantly longer period than either Hotmail or Yahoo Mail allows.

To get a Gmail account, you need to be invited by someone who already has one. Or, you can use the Gmail Invite Spooler (isnoop.net/gmail).

MSN HOTMAIL

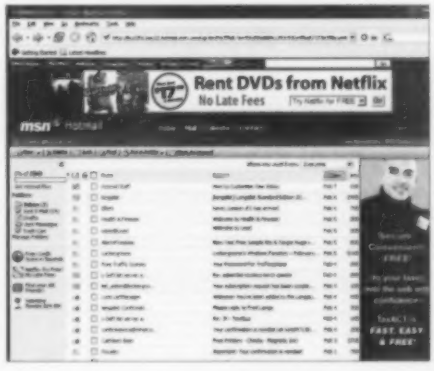
OUR EYES ARE burning after reviewing MSN Hotmail: We saw enough ads there to last a lifetime. Most free Web mail services have advertising, but Hotmail goes way overboard with banners, skyscrapers, "featured offers," and aspirin-size buttons everywhere. It's hard to care about the service's merits after wading though all that.

Hotmail provides 250MB of storage for free, as Yahoo Mail does, though it's significantly less than the 1GB that Gmail offers.

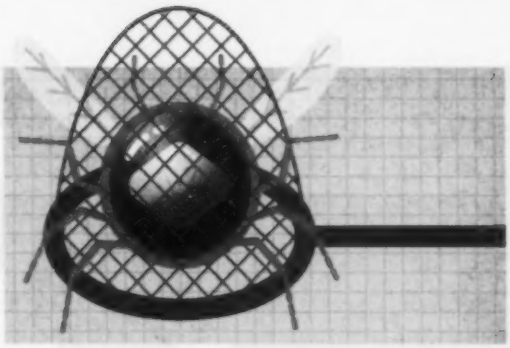
Hotmail deletes messages in the spam folder after only 5 days, which gives you little time to catch misfiled mail. In addition, Hotmail accounts that are left unused for more than 30 days may be deleted.

An upgrade to Hotmail Plus for $20 per year fetches you 2GB of storage space, permits file attachments of 20MB or less per message, and mercifully removes the glut of graphical advertisements. And a Plus account doesn't ex- ▶

MSN HOTMAIL serves up so many ads, you likely won't care about the collaboration tools and other features.



OnlyMyEmail: The Garbage Collector



IF YOU HAVE multiple e-mail addresses that are in need of a better spam filter, OnlyMyEmail might be the answer. Though the service provides an e-mail address and Web mail interface, its primary purpose is to remove spam from existing e-mail accounts. The system can check up to three POP3 or IMAP e-mail accounts—unifying them into a single inbox—and you don't have to abandon your current e-mail client. The service costs $3 per month, after a ten-day free trial.

We linked our OnlyMyEmail account to a mailbox filled with more than 3000 messages—mostly spam. The results were very positive: Only 11 junk messages reached our inbox, while the service dutifully removed the rest. Only one legitimate message, a newsletter subscription verification, was misinterpreted as spam.

We like the way OnlyMyEmail deals with junk: Rather than deliver it to a spam box that needs periodic attention, the service sends a daily e-mail summarizing the spam, viruses, and other nastygrams you've received. You can review a list of captured messages and have legitimate messages moved back into your inbox. You can also tell the system exactly what you characterize as junk, including virus-laden e-mail, messages from senders with foreign domains, newsletters, and direct-marketing announcements.

If you don't need to consolidate multiple e-mail accounts or don't want to use a Web browser to manage your spam folder, a spam filter that works with your e-mail client might be preferable. Some spam filters place a convenient toolbar in a POP3 e-mail client.

When you can't use your regular e-mail software, OnlyMyEmail offers a convenient though bare-bones Web mail interface. OnlyMyEmail is the sole Web mail service we tested that doesn't have a spelling checker, and it lacks other niceties for everyday use.

Accessed from an e-mail client, OnlyMyEmail is almost invisible, doing its work quietly and well. It's a reliable way to consolidate a few older, spam-filled accounts and make them useful again. *–K.S.*

• OnlyMyEmail, $3 per month, ★★★★☆ www.onlymyemail.com

pire simply because you don't use it often, either.

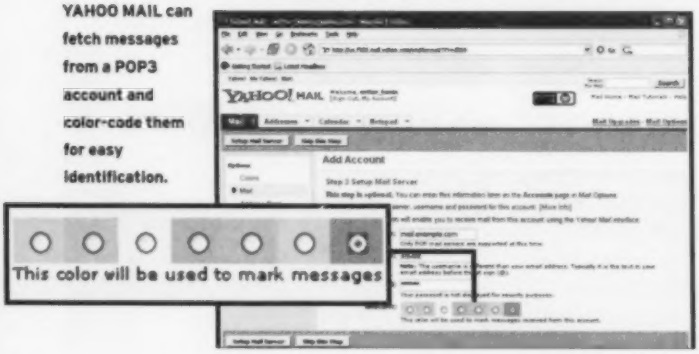
The junk mail filter is available at three levels: low, enhanced, and exclusive, which delivers mail only from people in your contacts list. Enhanced mode did an acceptable job, letting only nine junk messages into our inbox. However, it took the bait on four messages that we crafted using suspect words, classifying them as spam; in comparison, Gmail filtered only one of the messages erroneously, and both FastMail and Yahoo Mail correctly put all four in the inbox. To hone the Hotmail filter's work, you can set up blacklists and whitelists.

The Hotmail interface is a little bit clumsy; for example, adding a new friend to the contacts list requires multiple steps. However, the service provides a few collaboration tools. The calendar has a tasks list, and it can send reminders to Hotmail and MSN e-mail addresses. Also, you can publish your calendar on the Web. Overall, Hotmail provides a reasonable Web-based e-mail experience if you can endure the incessant ads.

YAHOO MAIL

YAHOO MAIL PROVIDES 250MB of storage and an intuitive interface. Like Hotmail, the free version has a lot of advertisements, though there seem to be slightly fewer of them and Yahoo Mail's better features—such as virus scanning and access to outside e-mail accounts—make them more tolerable. In the free version, attachments are scanned for viruses, an important feature that's missing in the other free Web services we tested.

When you are entering the name of the recipient for a new message, autocompletion provides quick access to the address book, as in Gmail. But Yahoo's message filters are more simplistic than ▶



YAHOO MAIL can fetch messages from a POP3 account and color-code them for easy identification.

ILLUSTRATION: HEADCASE DESIGN

FEATURES COMPARISON

E-Mail Software: Free and For-Pay Inboxes

THUNDERBIRD OFFERS MANY OF THE SAME features that paid programs do, but Outlook is better suited for corporate use.

E-MAIL SOFTWARE	Basics	Spam test results	Performance and extras	Comments
Microsoft Outlook 2003 ★★★★☆ find.pcworld.com/47104	• $109 • IMAP, MSN, POP3 accounts • Custom rules/filters • Spelling checker	• Spam identified after training: 94% • Legitimate mail called spam: 0.8%	• Ease of use: Very Good • Features: Very Good • Digital signatures and encryption, contact management, file sharing, automatic message archiving	Outlook's collaboration tools—and their tight integration with Microsoft Office—make this application a top choice for business users. The spam filter works well right out of the box.
Mozilla Thunderbird 1.0 Best Buy ★★★★½ find.pcworld.com/47106	• Free • IMAP, POP3 accounts • Custom rules/filters • Spelling checker	• Spam identified after training: 95% • Legitimate mail called spam: 0.8%	• Ease of use: Outstanding • Features: Very Good • Digital signatures and encryption, RSS reader, newsgroup client, downloadable extensions, color coding	The open-source Thunderbird 1.0 is easy to use and speedy. The program offers many downloadable extensions and a basic RSS reader. It can't automatically forward messages, however.
PocoMail 3.2 ★★★½☆ find.pcworld.com/47108	• $40 • IMAP, POP3 accounts • Custom rules/filters • Spelling checker	• Spam identified after training: 90% • Legitimate mail called spam: 1.6%	• Ease of use: Very Good • Features: Good • Adjustable spam filter, newsgroup client, scripting language	PocoMail is competent but basic, offering no collaboration tools or other exemplary features. The spam filter, though adjustable, was ineffective until we trained it.
Qualcomm Eudora 6.2 ★★★☆☆ find.pcworld.com/47110	• Free,[1] $50 • IMAP, POP3 accounts • Custom rules/filters • Spelling checker	• Spam identified after training: 98% • Legitimate mail called spam: 1.6%	• Ease of use: Fair • Features: Very Good • Digital signatures and encryption, antiphishing and flame warnings, color coding for messages	Eudora offers an odd mix of advanced and novice tools, such as warnings against potential scams. Plenty of plug-ins are available, but the interface needs an overhaul.

FOOTNOTE: [1] Eudora has two free versions: all features (except the spam filter) with advertisements, and fewer features without ads. **HOW WE TEST:** AV-Test.org performed spam filter testing on behalf of *PC World*. Each program downloaded and filtered a test mail sample containing 500 messages, 250 of which our testers identified as spam. The testers trained each junk mail filter, identifying for it any of the first 125 spam messages that landed in the inbox. The percentages given are for the last 125 legitimate messages and 125 spam messages, after training was completed.

Gmail's and Hotmail's, allowing you only to automatically move messages to designated folders.

Yahoo was less successful at filtering spam than Gmail and Hotmail. It let 25 junk messages slip into our inbox, though it correctly filtered 67 junk messages. Unlike Hotmail, Yahoo Mail did not misidentify the four messages we created with suspect subject lines, correctly placing them in the inbox. Yahoo stores messages in its spam folder for one month before deleting them.

Yahoo Mail can fetch messages from your ISP's POP3 e-mail account—a feature that Gmail and Hotmail lack. It color-codes messages imported from other servers for easy identification.

You can share your Yahoo calendar with friends or publish it to the Web. A unique synchronization feature permits you to move your contacts, calendar, and notepad between the service and a PDA or organization software.

Accounts are deactivated after four months of inactivity, which is a considerably longer fallow period than Hotmail allows.

By upgrading to Yahoo Mail Plus, for $20 per year, you obtain 2GB of storage with a 20MB limit per attachment. The premium version also adds the abilities to create disposable e-mail addresses (which you use temporarily to register at Web sites that might spam you, for example), access your e-mail from a POP3 (but not an IMAP) e-mail client, and teach the spam filter. Also, you get automatic virus cleaning, and ads disappear from the site.

Desktop Clients

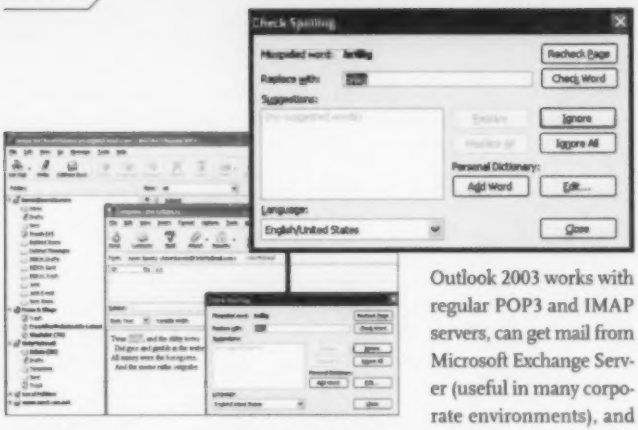
MICROSOFT OUTLOOK

THE NAME OUTLOOK 2003 might make the program sound past its prime. In fact, this e-mail app remains a worthy contender for corporate users, but its helpful collaboration features are overkill for most home and small-office users.

Outlook is available by itself for $109 or as part of Microsoft Office.

Outlook's unique rules wizard for setting up mail filters could make the task easier for newbies. Outlook also has the ability to send encrypted and digitally signed messages. When your correspondents use a compatible mail program, you can restrict them from forwarding your mail, or you can set the message to expire after a certain date, a function unavailable in the other mail clients we tested.

Integrated access to a dictionary, a language translator, and an encyclopedia ensures that you'll always have the right word at your fingertips. ▶



THUNDERBIRD'S spelling checker can't check spelling while you type, as PocoMail and Eudora can.

Outlook 2003 works with regular POP3 and IMAP servers, can get mail from Microsoft Exchange Server (useful in many corporate environments), and can download mail from Hotmail Plus accounts. Unlike PocoMail and Thunderbird, however, Outlook doesn't include a newsgroup reader.

Without any training Outlook's spam filter identified more junk mail than any other client app: It caught 19 of the first 25 spam messages testers sent it. After testers had trained its filter, Outlook caught 94 percent of the junk.

The calendar, task manager, and contacts manager are nicely integrated. Also, you can initiate instant messaging conversations from Outlook.

MOZILLA THUNDERBIRD

FOR HOME AND SMALL-BUSINESS users who want very good features but don't want to pay for e-mail, Mozilla Thunderbird 1.0 is our top choice.

Commands are easy to find, and the search field provides instant gratification: Type a few letters of the subject or the sender's name, and a crowded inbox is reduced to the messages that match. In addition you can customize the views with categories like "Unread" or "Last 5 days."

The program can encrypt messages and attach a digital signing certificate. Thunderbird's filters automatically file and color-code messages, though they lack Eudora's ability to match patterns or automatically forward a message. Our biggest complaint is that Thunderbird's spelling checker works only after you've finished composing a message: It can't check your spelling as you type.

Without any training, Thunderbird's spam filter caught 18 of the first 25 spam messages it received, just shy of the success rate of Outlook's filter. After our testers finished training it, the filter caught 95 percent of the junk mail it received.

Downloadable extensions allow you to add new tools to the program. Among the dozens of add-ons available at the Mozilla Web site are a dictionary search function and support for mouse gestures, which allow you to execute a command (such as opening the next message) by right-clicking and pushing the mouse to the right, for example.

Besides supporting POP3 and IMAP for e-mail, the application serves as a Usenet newsgroup client and as an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) reader. The RSS reader is a nice touch, and Thunderbird is the only desktop e-mail client we looked at that includes one. Given the growing popularity of blogs, it is a sensible addition to an e-mail program. ▶

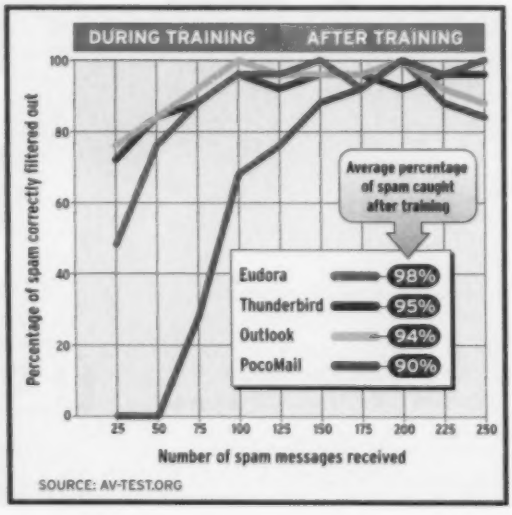
Spam Filters: The Learning Curve

TO SEE HOW WELL the four desktop clients filtered spam, we asked AV-Test.org to evaluate them. Each app received a total of 500 messages: ten batches, 50 messages at a time, with the results measured after each batch. Half of the sent messages were junk and the other half were legitimate, including some newsletters. The testers used each application's default spam-filter settings.

After each of the first five batches, the testers taught each application's filter which messages—125 in total—were spam. Then the testers let the apps sift through the last 250 messages, without further instruction.

Though all of the programs eventually achieved at least a 90 percent success rate, some of them had a more difficult learning curve. Outlook was the most impressive out of the box, identifying 19 of the 25 spam messages in the first batch. PocoMail, on the other hand, learned relatively slowly: Its junk mail filter is turned off by default, and the program missed the first 50 junk messages. However, PocoMail also has a Bayesian filter, which examines all of the text in a message to determine whether that message is spam, though the user must train it. Eventually—after AV-Test's testers identified the first 125 spam messages for it—PocoMail's Bayesian filter caught up to the rest of the class, correctly filtering 90 percent of the remaining junk mail.

–Eric Butterfield



SOURCE: AV-TEST.ORG

Getting E-Mail on Your Phone

TO GET YOUR e-mail on an Internet-ready phone, you have to pick the right wireless carrier. First, make sure that your carrier supports the protocol used by the e-mail account your ISP gives you. Most major wireless carriers support POP3 (Post Office Protocol 3), though Verizon supports only IMAP (Internet Message Access Protocol).

Even if your business's e-mail system supports the same protocol as your wireless carrier, consult your IS department. Though both Microsoft Exchange and IBM Lotus Domino servers support POP3 and IMAP, your company's virtual private network requirements or firewall settings could stymie access.

For accessing your Web mail, choose a wireless carrier that offers a microbrowser version. All five carriers listed in the chart at right offer AOL Mail, and most provide MSN Hotmail or Yahoo Mail.

Also, beware of charges: With Cingular's $3-per-month plan, for example, you'll pay 2 cents per kilobyte of transmitted data. Nextel, Sprint PCS, and T-Mobile offer plans with unlimited usage. *–Eric Butterfield*

Where Wireless E-Mail Can Go

Check for the proper protocol—and for extra charges.

Cingular
$3 per month and up (plus 2 cents per KB), find.pcworld.com/47464
• AOL Mail, MSN Hotmail, Yahoo Mail • Supports POP3

Nextel
$15 per month (unlimited usage), find.pcworld.com/47465
• AOL Mail, MSN Hotmail • Supports POP3

Sprint PCS
$15 per month (unlimited usage), find.pcworld.com/47466
• AOL Mail, MSN Hotmail, Yahoo Mail • Supports IMAP, POP3

T-Mobile
$5 per month and up (unlimited usage), find.pcworld.com/47467
• AOL Mail, Yahoo Mail Plus • Supports IMAP, POP3

Verizon
$5 per month and up (plus minutes charges), find.pcworld.com/47468
• AOL Mail, MSN Hotmail, Yahoo Mail • Supports IMAP

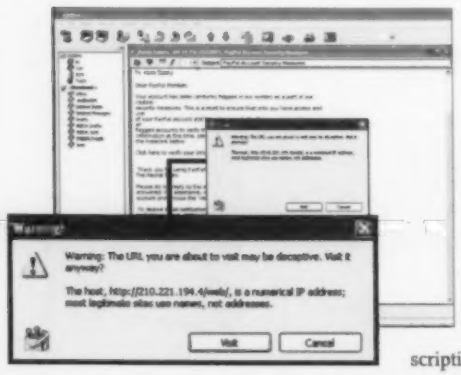
POCOMAIL 3.2

POCOMAIL 3.2 IS A decent, basic e-mail client that doesn't overwhelm you with extra features. It has no RSS viewer or collaboration tools, just straightforward, reliable POP3 and IMAP e-mail. With scripting and numerous configuration options, it could appeal to control freaks, but we can't find many reasons to spend $40 on PocoMail when free e-mail clients can work just as well.

PocoMail's interface can be convoluted, though its tabs let you conveniently switch between folders. Also, the program can check spelling as you type. Other features include message threading for following conversations, automatic completion of phrases (for example, you can set it to replace "yt" with "Yours Truly, Frederick Smelty III"), and a pop-up window that permits you to read a new message while you use another application.

Oddly, in PocoMail's default settings the junk mail filter is turned off. But PocoMail also has a Bayesian filter, which eventually learned to filter out 90 percent of the spam it received.

PocoMail 3.2's built-in scripting language enables you to build automated mail-handling tasks, such as finding all messages that you haven't replied to yet. Also, PocoMail offers a decent Usenet client.



FOR INEXPERIENCED e-mailers, Eudora pops up unique alerts to warn of "phishing" attempts in incoming mail.

QUALCOMM EUDORA 6.2

IF EUDORA 6.2 WERE A PERSON, it would be a middle-aged man enduring a midlife crisis: smart and capable, but no longer youthful looking and hip. Eudora's interface is cluttered, and it reminded us of Windows 3.1, with countless cryptic, unlabeled icons littering the landscape.

Interesting features aimed at newbies include MoodWatch, which warns users that they might be writing an inflammatory message, and alerts about potential "phishing" attempts in incoming mail.

Eudora serves up SSL encryption, graphs of e-mail statistics, and powerful filters. For example, you can have it automatically forward messages with a specified number of letters in the subject line.

Plug-ins can adjust text by rewrapping, sorting, and fixing capitalization. But the search function is like molasses compared with Thunderbird's.

After our testers trained it, Eudora's spam filter identified 98 percent of the junk mail it received. At the outset, however, it spotted only 12 of the first 25 junk messages sent to it. ■

Kevin Savetz is a freelance technology writer who has written for more than 80 publications. Eric Butterfield is an associate editor for PC World.